

9/16/21 Thursday

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US Grand Jury Indicts Clinton-Linked Attorney for Making False Statements to the FBI
By - Evan Craighead

Over the past few months, the US Office of Special Counsel has convened a grand jury to obtain documents and witness testimony amid his examination of federal investigators' probe into conspiracy allegations involving Russia and the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump.

Michael Sussmann, a Perkins Coie partner with close ties to the Democratic party, was indicted on Thursday by a grand jury associated with special counsel John Durham's office.

[The indictment, obtained by the Washington Post](#), accuses Sussman - a former federal prosecutor - of lying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation about the capacity in which he was providing allegations of cyber links between Russia's Alfa Bank and former US President Donald Trump's Trump Organization.

"Specifically, Sussman stated falsely that he was not doing his work on the aforementioned allegations "for any client," which led the FBI General Counsel to understand that Sussman was acting as a good citizen merely passing along information, not as a paid advocate or political operative," reads the Thursday filing in the US District Court for the District of Columbia. Sussman's statement to federal investigators during their September 19, 2016, meeting has been characterized by Durham as "intentionally false and misleading." Furthermore, Sussman testified to congressional investigators in December 2017 that he met with the FBI on behalf of a prominent cybersecurity researcher.

The date of Sussman's meeting with agents falls just days within the five-year statute of limitations period for such a charge.

The indictment from Durham's office hinges on the suspicion that Sussman was secretly working on behalf of former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. [NBC News highlighted](#) that Clinton's campaign team was pushing the Alfa Bank-Trump Organization story to the press at the time of Sussman's meeting.

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Trump Expresses Sympathy for US Capitol Riot Suspects Ahead of September 18 Rally
By - Evan Craighead

Fences reinforced with concrete barriers were erected around the US Capitol on Thursday, in anticipation of the right-wing "Justice for J6" rally on Saturday. The demonstration is expected to

attract hundreds of attendees to Washington, DC, and comes in support of pro-Trump rioters who have been criminally charged in the wake of January 6.

US President Donald Trump extended sympathy and well-wishes to supporters of his 2016 presidential campaign who are now facing charges related to their respective roles in the January 6 riot at the US Capitol.

"Our hearts and minds are with the people being persecuted so unfairly relating to the January 6th protest concerning the Rigged Presidential Election," [Trump wrote in a Thursday statement](#). "In addition to everything else, it has proven conclusively that we are a two-tiered system of justice. In the end, however, JUSTICE WILL PREVAIL!"

Though Trump's brief statement comes just two days before the "Justice for J6" rally, the right-wing demonstration is not linked to the former US president or his team.

In fact, event organizer Matt Braynard took to social media earlier this week to request that those attending the Saturday rally abstain from donning any garments in support of either Trump or US President Joe Biden.

Citing Trump aides, the [New York Times reported on Wednesday](#) that the former US president will be in New Jersey, at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster, and has "little interest in engaging with the protest."

Moreover, Trump reportedly views the September 18 event as a "setup" that will be weaponized against him by the media, "regardless of the outcome."

Melissa Smislova, deputy undersecretary for intelligence enterprise readiness at the Department of Homeland Security, noted on Tuesday that US officials expect around 700 demonstrators to attend the "Justice for J6" rally.

Naturally, the event is expected to attract attendees with ties to groups that allegedly participated in the January 6 riot, including the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers.

Federal, state and local authorities in the DC Metropolitan area will be on high alert during the Saturday event, as well as the rest of the weekend.

US Capitol Police [Chief Tom Manger asserted earlier this month](#) that his force is "closely monitoring September 18" and would be "planning accordingly." Back in August, the Metropolitan Police Department urged its entire force to postpone any vacations scheduled around the weekend of the demonstration.

As an added measure, [temporary fencing has been erected around the US Capitol](#).

US National Guard forces will be on standby, per Capitol Police request, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation has been tasked with monitoring social media platforms such as Parler, Gab and Telegram.

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UK High Court Rules Will of Prince Philip to Remain Sealed for 90 Years
By - Evan Craighead

Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, died two months shy of turning 100 on April 9, ending what was more than six decades beside Queen Elizabeth II. The death of Philip - the longest-serving

consort - triggered an age-old convention that seeks to preserve the "dignity and standing" of the queen.

London's High Court established on Thursday that the will belonging to the late Duke of Edinburgh will remain sealed and out of public view for 90 years.

The decision was handed down by Judge Andrew McFarlane, president of the Family Division of the High Court, following a private application hearing back in July. Arguments were heard from lawyers representing Philip's estate and the attorney general - on behalf of the public.

"I have held that, because of the constitutional position of the Sovereign, it is appropriate to have a special practice in relation to royal wills," the judge said, [as reported by the BBC](#). "There is a need to enhance the protection afforded to truly private aspects of the lives of this limited group of individuals in order to maintain the dignity of the Sovereign and close members of her family."

The judge elected to hold the hearing in private, as it was likely to trigger "very significant publicity and conjecture." The presence of the attorney general, on behalf of the public, was enough to satisfy the public interest requirement, according to the judge.

McFarlane disclosed that he did not fully observe the will, and was only provided with the identity of the document's executor, and the date of the will's execution.

"I accepted the submission that, whilst there may be public curiosity as to the private arrangements that a member of the royal family may choose to make in their will, there is no true public interest in the public knowing this wholly private information," the judge said.

McFarlane also ruled in favor of a request "to exclude the value of the estate from the grant of probate," [according to Reuters](#).

The late Duke of Edinburgh is survived by four children, eight grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

Following the nine decades, an "initial and private process will be undertaken to consider whether at that stage the will may be unsealed and made public."

Future judgments associated with Philip's case will not be made public, per the application.

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US House Armed Services Committee Warns Troubled F-35 Program May Become Unsustainable at Its Peak

By -Evan Craighead

Earlier this month, Rep. Adam Smith, chairman of the US House Armed Services Committee, revealed that he recommends the US Air Force invest in smaller, unmanned aircraft, as the F-35 may not remain as modern as previously. He said that while the costly multirole jet outperforms the F-16, the advent of new missile technology poses a threat.

The House Armed Services Committee recently highlighted that the weapons system of the US' F-35 fleet will have to undergo a series of software updates in order to account for technological advancements by adversaries.

The congressional committee's concerns were detailed in a September [report for Fiscal Year 2022](#).

"The committee supports the F-35 program and acknowledges it is a capability that can be used against advanced integrated air defense systems operating against the United States or its foreign partners and allies during high-end, very contested contingencies when the aircraft is finally installed with Technical Refresh-3 hardware and Block 4 software capabilities," the report read.

"But given the extraordinary costs to date of the program, the committee calls into question the actual affordability of the program for the taxpayer after 20 years since its inception."

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) also expressed a negative outlook for the F-35 program within a July report. The GAO projected that the US Air Force will be faced with incredible sustainment costs once F-35 operations reach their peak in 2036.

"If the projected annual sustainment cost overruns — conservatively estimated at tens of billions of dollars when aggregated — are not reversed and brought into alignment with the affordability constraints, over time there will be increasing and significant pressure on DOD's annual budget as the number of the aircraft in the F-35 fleet increases," the watchdog warned.

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France Reportedly Cancels Washington Gala After 'Betrayal' Submarine Deal

By - Gaby Arancibia

France earlier voiced its discontent with the newly announced defense pact between the US, UK and Australia as it saw its own arrangement with Canberra trashed in favor of the trilateral deal.

A gala intended to be held at the French embassy in Washington, DC, has been cancelled in the wake of the US' new defense initiative with the UK and Australia, it was revealed on Thursday. The event, which was intended to commemorate the 240th anniversary of the Battle of Capes, was expected to be held at the French embassy on Friday. A portion of the event was also meant to be held in the Maryland port city of Baltimore, aboard a French Frigate.

An unidentified official who spoke with the New York Times for a Thursday story [confirmed](#) that the gala would not be held, and that France's top naval officer would be returning to Paris. As the event was meant to highlight the strength of the US-French alliance, the official stressed that it would have been "ridiculous" to host the event in light of the new security partnership.

That same official also relayed to the outlet that the US' actions, specifically of not detailing the new arrangement to France, underscore that the Land of the Free is no longer the dependable ally it once was to the European nation.

As the Times reports, French officials had repeatedly attempted to broach the subject with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan, but had ultimately been "rebuffed" on several occasions.

An unidentified US official had noted to the publication that Biden insiders had kept mum of the initiative because they knew that France would protest the move, adding that the Biden White

House came to the conclusion that it was up to Australia to inform France since the folks Down Under had their own defense pact with the French.

In fact, in the wake of the new defense pact between the three countries, France's Naval Group blasted the move and voiced "deep disappointment" as the new arrangement meant that its own \$90 billion submarine [contract](#) with Australia was effectively trashed.

The French Foreign Ministry added onto the defense contractor's remarks, emphasizing that the behavior exhibited by Australia, the US and UK were deplorable, and not at all in line with the cooperation held between the parties. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told Franceinfo Radio that the new deal was a "unilateral, brutal, unpredictable decision" largely similar to those made by former US President Donald Trump.

"A knife in the back," Le Drian said of Australia's decision to sidestep the contract with the Naval Group.

The new so-called [AUKUS mission](#) will see the three countries work collectively to strengthen one another's ability to back security and defense interests while also [arming](#) Australia with a nuclear-powered submarine fleet and tomahawk missiles.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison earlier told reporters that the nation could see the new submarine fleet "in the water" sometime within the next ten years.

However, it's worth noting that the alliance is also largely seen as an attempt by the trio to counter China's influence in the region. In fact, China is one of many critics of the new arrangement.

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Botched FBI Probe Into Nassar Abuses Highlights 'Endemic Failures' Within Bureau, Former Agent Says

By -Gaby Arancibia

The US Department of Justice's inspector general revealed in July that the FBI made a series of errors in its handling of sexual abuse allegations against former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. Addressing the findings, top US gymnasts told lawmakers on Capitol Hill that there must be change in order to prevent such missteps moving forward.

The failures exhibited by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the Larry Nassar case proves yet again that the agency has dropped the ball when it comes to sharing pertinent information with authorities, a former agent has stated.

Coleen Rowley, a lawyer and retired FBI agent who turned whistleblower, revealed to Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines on Thursday that the agency's missteps in the handling of the Nassar case underscored that the bureau is suffering from "endemic failures."

"There are endemic failures on the part of the higher levels of the FBI," Rowley said, touching on the revelation in the July inspector general report that determined agents investigating the sexual abuse allegations had failed to act with the "utmost seriousness and urgency" that the case required.

“This essentially was a failure to share information because these FBI officials were advised in July 2015 [of Nassar’s abuses], and nothing happened in the case. ... There was this big long gap of over a year where the FBI in Indianapolis kept it secret.”

The inspector general’s findings [revealed](#) that the FBI’s Indianapolis field office had first learned of the sex abuse accusations after USA Gymnastics had carried out its own internal investigations, but that the bureau never acted on launching its own probe until October 2016. During that 16-month period, FBI officials did not alert the authorities in Michigan, where the abuses had occurred and where Nassar was continuing to work as a physician at Michigan State University. In fact, the bureau’s probe wasn’t launched until USA Gymnastics chose to file a new complaint in Los Angeles.

The watchdog report also found that federal agents failed to document allegations when they were first brought to their attention, as well as improperly documented the existence of a thumb drive that included slides and videos of the highly intrusive “medical technique” that Nassar was performing on athletes. The files had been provided by USA Gymnastics President Stephen Penny at the time.

Rowley told show hosts Jamarl Thomas and Shane Stranahan that the faults exemplified in the case highlighted that the bureau had the “same problems that we’re seeing with the FBI over and over again.”

“Child porn is clear FBI jurisdiction but in this case it was merely allegations of sex abuse from the start, and that is more of a local, state crime - not a federal crime,” she admitted. “These agents should have shared it ... but they just sat on it.”

In the end, Rowley told Stranahan that the athletes coming forward with the allegations had better luck divulging the information to the media, saying, “that’s where some action is taken.” [Appearing](#) before the Senate Judiciary Committee, US gymnasts Simone Biles, McKayla Maroney, Aly Raisman and Maggie Nichols called for change during the first half of Wednesday’s hearings at Capitol Hill.

“We suffered and continue to suffer because no one at the FBI, [USA Gymnastics] or the [US Olympic Committee] did what was necessary to protect us,” Biles told lawmakers. “We have been failed and we deserve answers. Nassar is where he belongs, but those who enabled him deserve to be held accountable. If they are not, I am convinced that this will continue to happen to others across Olympic sports.”

Having pleaded guilty to seven counts of criminal sexual conduct and using his medical position to assault and molest girls under the guise of medical treatment, Nassar was sentenced in July to 40 to 175 years in prison. During the legal proceedings, more than 150 women testified of the sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of the former USA Gymnastics doctor.

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'Cut Him Off Now!': Newsmax Host Loses Cool After US Vet Critiques Trump Over Afghan Withdrawal

By - Gaby Arancibia

Although the process to remove American troops began under former US President Donald Trump, backlash stemming from the exit has largely consumed the Biden administration, with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle lashing out. The president has stood firm that the pullout was necessary to bring the near 20-year occupation to a close.

A Newsmax host recently lost his cool on live TV after an American veteran stated that both the Trump and Biden administrations were to blame for the chaotic withdrawal and ensuing crisis that consumed Afghanistan.

Video of the eyebrow-raising confrontation shows Newsmax host Grant Stinchfield initially discussing the US withdrawal before abruptly raising his voice and yelling at producers to "cut" guest Joe Saboe from the program. Saboe is an Iraq War veteran who founded the Team America organization to help Americans and allies.

Stinchfield claimed that US President Donald Trump wanted to get out of Afghanistan "real bad," but that he ultimately held off on removing troops because "he knew" that chaos would unfold if he did so.

"I've got Americans there that are stuck. To me, that's a hostage situation," Stinchfield commented. But then came Saboe's unwelcomed response that Trump's handling of the situation was "fairly weak," which immediately sent the Newsmax host off the rails.

"Joe I'm gonna cut you, I'm already weak, I'm already low on time, Joe. Cut him off, please. Cut him off now!" he yells out to his producers, with Saboe being pulled from the screen. "You're not gonna blame this on President Trump on my show. That's not happening!"

"Don't come on this program and take the talking points of the left and blame President Trump -that's not helping anybody. The Biden administration screwed this up from the very start. You know it, I know it, the country knows it," Stinchfield yelled out to his viewers.

Regaining his composure, Stinchfield later ended the segment by stating that he would be bringing "a real hero" to the show before quickly acknowledging that Saboe was a hero as well since he served in the US military.

In a [Thursday statement](#) to The Hill, a spokesperson for Newsmax stated that Stinchfield fully "respects all our veterans" but that he "doesn't believe the media and others should be pointing fingers at Pres. Trump for a problem Pres. Biden created by his chaotic withdrawal."

It seems worth noting that it was under Trump that the latest withdrawal procedures were initiated after the former president brought Taliban* officials to the negotiating table for a peace deal. While the agreement initially laid out a May 1 deadline, Biden later extended the timeline to ensure that adequate time would be given to withdraw.

While Biden moved to simply deliver on the arrangement mapped out under the Trump White House, the pullout was admittedly far from ideal, and has only served as fuel for criticism of Biden's efforts. Many have blasted the administration, including some family members of 9/11 victims who [viewed](#) the withdrawal as a disgrace to their loved ones' memory.

Biden has repeatedly indicated that his decision to continue with the withdrawal agreement was rooted in a desire to not send another generation of Americans into the war-torn country, especially as not even Afghan security forces moved to resist Taliban forces before they claimed the Afghan capital of Kabul.

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'Human-Sized Penguin' Uncovered by New Zealand Schoolchildren Reveals Ancient Species
By - Adriana Montes

A giant, child-sized penguin whose fossilized remains were first discovered by New Zealand schoolchildren has been revealed as a new species.

In January 2006, schoolchildren from the Hamilton Junior Naturalist Club set out on an expedition to fossil hunt at New Zealand's Kawhia Harbour when they came across some rare bones.

Mike Safely, president of the Hamilton Junior Naturalist Club, says this is an experience that the children involved will remember for the rest of their lives.

"It was a rare privilege for the kids in our club to have the opportunity to discover and rescue this enormous fossil penguin."

"Finding fossils near where we live reminds us that we share our environment with animals who are the descendants of lineages that reach back into deep time," added Safely.

Scientists from across the globe immediately made their way to New Zealand to identify the discovery.

Researchers from Massey University and Bruce Museum in the US came together at the Waikato Museum in Hamilton to analyze the fossil.

Paleontologists used 3D scanning technology to compare the fossil with digital versions of bones from around the world.

Dr. Daniel Thomas, a senior lecturer in zoology from Massey's School of Natural and Computational Sciences, determined that the fossil was between 27.3 million and 34.6 million years old.

Thomas compared the identified species to the Kairaku penguins that were first described from Otago, but with much longer legs.

"These longer legs would have made the penguin much taller than other Kairuku species while it was walking on land; perhaps around 1.4m tall, and may have influenced how fast it could swim or how deep it could dive."

"It's been a real privilege to contribute to the story of this incredible penguin. We know how important this fossil is to so many people," he adds.

New Zealand is known to hold the oldest penguin fossils dating back to the dinosaur era.

Continued exploration and finding of new fossils will provide more knowledge to scientists on how they evolved into the creatures living in Antarctica today.

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Biden Retrieved on New Attack Ad Against Buttigieg Over Fears of Reprisal, Book Claims
By - Adriana Montes

According to the forthcoming book titled "Peril, written by Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, then-candidate Joe Biden reluctantly approved a campaign ad, reprimanding his then-primary rival Pete Buttigieg's record as a South Bend mayor. Woodward and Costa's new book "Peril" claims how Biden's campaign pulled together a new attack called [Pete's Record](#) after facing struggle in the Democratic presidential primary in early 2020. Which contrasted Buttigieg's experience as mayor with Biden's experience as vice president.

The ad makes a sarcastic remark implying that both candidates have helped "shape our economy".

"Joe Biden led the passage and implementation of the Recovery Act, saving our economy from a depression," the ad said, before the background music transitioned to a more mellow tone.

"Pete Buttigieg revitalized the sidewalks of Downtown South Bend by laying out decorative brick."

The ad also compared Pete Buttigieg's installing of decorative lights under bridges with Biden's effort to help lead the passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Biden allegedly changed his mind just six hours after approving its release, fearing the attack ad would receive criticism and be seen as a desperate attempt to smear Buttigieg's image.

"Take it off," Biden reportedly told his senior adviser Mike Donilon. "Take it back. I don't want it airing any longer. Take it down!"

By then the ad had made its way through the media and YouTube.

Buttigieg eventually dropped out of the race, endorsed Biden and was later nominated by the new chairman to take on the position of Transportation secretary.

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2024 Republican Presidential Candidates Lay in Wait for Donald Trump's Decision

By - Nevin Brown

Donald Trump has had a stranglehold on Republican politics from the moment he secured the party's 2016 presidential nomination. With his 2024 presidential bid still up in the air, he leaves other Republican hopefuls in limbo.

Trump remains incredibly popular within the GOP. [According to a CNN/SRSS poll](#), among Republicans, 69% say supporting Donald Trump is very or somewhat important to what being a Republican means. His importance to the identity of the party makes him the early frontrunner to claim the 2024 Republican nomination.

However, Trump's hold over the party could be waning. The same poll reported that 63% of Republicans believe Trump should be the leader of the party, but only 51% believe Trump gives Republicans the best chance to win the presidency in 2024. In a March 2019 poll, 78% of Republicans said that Trump was the party's best chance of winning the 2020 presidential election. Part of the degradation in confidence of Trump's ability to win the White House likely stems from his loss to Joe Biden in 2020 and his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

These new poll findings paint a complicated picture for Republicans with aspirations of making a presidential bid in 2024. Trump remains popular, but the party's confidence in his ability to win has taken a hit. In essence, Republicans haven't let it be known what type of candidate they're looking for. There's also the reality of Trump's highly aggressive rhetoric towards political opponents. Any Republican that throws their hat in the 2024 ring could find themselves the subject of intense and unyielding ridicule.

Trump remains the best bet to win the 2024 Republican nomination at +208 followed by Ron DeSantis (+375), Nikki Haley (+733), Mike Pence (+1400), and Tucker Carlson (+1500). DeSantis has seen his odds surge since he was at +4000 on November 6th, 2020. The 2024 US presidential election is still three years away, Donald Trump has multiple ongoing lawsuits, and the 2022 midterm elections will be instrumental in capturing how voters feel.

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US Will Stand With Australia Against Pressure From China: Blinken
By - Nevin Brown

The announcement of AUKUS, a trilateral defense agreement between the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, has sparked outrage in Beijing and Paris. The deal is meant to strengthen the three nations' security and reach throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the United States will stand with Australia against pressure from China and raised concerns about China's use of economic coercion against Australia.

The announcement of the Trilateral security partnership between Australia, the US, and the United Kingdom, known as AUKUS will facilitate the sharing of technologies related to cyber security, artificial intelligence, underwater systems, and long-range strike capabilities.

The US is also determined to help Australia acquire nuclear submarines to expand their reach and defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

Blinken commented on France's assertion that Australia stabbed them in the back over a scrapped submarine deal.

"We strongly welcome European countries playing a strong role in the Indo-Pacific...France is a vital partner in this on so many other things...we place fundamental value on that partnership."

The US Secretary of State passed on answering whether or not Australia stabbed France in the back and suggested that Australia should answer for their desire to obtain US submarine technology.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin dismissed the idea that the US went into the agreement "with a reciprocal mindset" in sharing its most advanced submarine technology. As Australia has rebuffed the United States in the past over strategic military installments on the continent-country.

When asked if AUKUS raises tensions with China, Secretary Austin responded "this agreement is not aimed at any country or anyone."

One of Australia's main motivations for joining the agreement was their desire to maintain submarine superiority in the region. The heads of their Navy believed that moving away from diesel fuel submarines and towards nuclear-powered ones would allow them to maintain it into the 2030s.

China has pushed back on the deal saying that it threatens regional peace.

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Alex Murdaugh and The Fall of a Southern Dynasty

By - Nevin Brown

Alex Murdaugh has been charged with insurance fraud following his confession of a failed suicide attempt by a hitman to secure his son a \$10 million insurance payout.

The legal circumstances surrounding Murdaugh have blossomed, from a contained small-town crime news snippet into a full-blown true-crime saga. The South Carolina attorney and occasional prosecutor [faces charges of insurance fraud](#), conspiracy to commit insurance fraud, and filing a false police report.

However, that is just the tip of the iceberg. Murdaugh's failed scheme to hire a hitman to murder him so his son could collect a \$10 million life insurance policy that led to the aftermentioned charges has led to a series of new investigations. Much like William Faulkner's American epic, "Absalom! Absalom!," each peak into the Murdaugh family unveils a deeper and darker look into a southern patriarchy.

The Murdaugh family is the definition of a dynasty. From 1920 to 2006, a man with the surname Murdaugh served as the solicitor of the 14th Judicial Circuit of South Carolina. For 86 years, one family controlled the courts of the Beaufort, Colleton, Hampton, Jasper and Allendale counties. For 86 years, they determined what charges to bring, what crimes to investigate, and what sentences to recommend. For 86 years, they were the law.

The Murdaughs didn't just preside over the 14th Judicial district, they also started and ran the highly successful law firm of Peters, Murdaugh, Parker, Eltzroth, Detrick, or PMPED Law Firm. One family was on both sides of the courtroom. The power that the Murdaugh family held gave them the ability to be shielded from the law, and to wield it as they saw fit.

Alex Murdaugh wasn't born with a silver spoon, but rather a silver gavel.

The September 4, 2021 failed assisted suicide attempt by Alex Murdaugh was simply the final breach in a long leaking dam. The day before, he left the family law firm of [PMPED over accusations that he misappropriated funds](#), and, mere months earlier, on June 7, his son and wife were fatally shot in their Islandton home. The murder brought national attention to the family, and resulted in an interview of [Alex's two brothers with ABC News](#). The murder has yet to be solved and no charges have been filed.

The interview paints the Murdaughs as a pillar of their community, an upstanding family with nothing to hide. Yet, that wasn't entirely true. Alex's son Paul had faced three felony charges following a February 2019 boating accident that resulted in the death of Mallory Beach.

As of June 2021, no trial had been scheduled, and there were whispers that the Murdaugh's deep connections at the 14th Circuit may have had something to do with that. However, these remain rumors.

Adding further speculation to the Murdaughs using their influence to avoid legal consequences was the death of their housekeeper. Gloria Satterfield died at the Murdaugh's home in an apparent slip and fall accident.

However, her death certificate said she died of natural causes and was never reported to the local coroners' office. Her estate filed a wrongful death suit with the Murdaughs, settling for \$500,000, but as of now, the family hasn't received any money. With all of the attention on Alex Murdaugh, the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division has opened [a criminal investigation in Satterfield's death](#).

In 2015, Stephen Smith died in a hit-and-run accident about 10 miles from the Murdaugh's estate. The case was ruled a hit-and-run, but investigators felt that foul play could have been at hand. Smith's mother [believed her son had been murdered](#) and has insinuated that the Murdaugh family was either directly involved or helped facilitate a cover-up.

Alex Murdaugh's attorney claims his client was severely depressed and addicted to opioids. The combination of his son and wife being murdered, and then his father dying three days later, would send anyone in a downward spiral. Another factor could be that Murdaugh faced serious financial strains. He had yet to pay the Satterfields in the wrongful death suit, and he had misappropriated funds from his family's law firm.

The truth in all of these cases has yet to be revealed. Are the Murdaughs a murderous family or have they used their deep connections in the justice system to help shield themselves and others from justice? Were Paul and Maggie Murdaugh slain by someone who felt Paul had skirted retribution for the death of Mallory Beach? Or had Alex Murdaugh done the unthinkable? Perhaps the most puzzling, and likely the most revealing bit of information is why did Alex Murdaugh hire a hitman to carry out his suicide? Was it just for the life insurance payout? Was it to make it look like he had enemies and draw eyes away from the family?

The story of the Murdaughs has yet to be fully written. With multiple investigations going on at once, there's no telling what will be revealed.

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Biden Signs Executive Order to Allow New Sanctions on Parties Fueling Ethiopia Conflict

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday signed an executive order to allow new sanctions on the sides fueling the conflict in Ethiopia, according to a statement released by the White House.

"The Executive Order I signed today establishes a new sanctions regime that will allow us to target those responsible for, or complicit in, prolonging the conflict in Ethiopia, obstructing humanitarian access, or preventing a ceasefire," Biden said in the statement.

Biden said his administration would continue to press for a negotiated ceasefire in the conflict-ridden country in order to put an end to abuses of civilians and allow humanitarian access to those in need.

"The United States is determined to push for a peaceful resolution of this conflict, and we will provide full support to those leading mediation efforts, including the African Union High Representative for the Horn of Africa Olusegun Obasanjo," Biden said.

Ethiopia is currently dealing with a protracted armed conflict in one of its northern provinces. Fighting in the Tigray region broke out in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party — Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) — of attacking a regional military base to hijack weapons and arm the anti-government militia.

An estimated 2 million of Tigray's 6 million people are reported to have fled their homes amid the hostilities, and an estimated 900,000 people are likely experiencing famine conditions. In addition, about 33,000 severely malnourished children are projected to face imminent risk of death if more aid is not forthcoming to the people of Tigray, according to UN figures.

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Biden Signs Executive Order to Allow New Sanctions on Parties Fueling Ethiopia Conflict

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday signed an executive order to allow new sanctions on the sides fueling the conflict in Ethiopia, according to a statement released by the White House.

"The Executive Order I signed today establishes a new sanctions regime that will allow us to target those responsible for, or complicit in, prolonging the conflict in Ethiopia, obstructing humanitarian access, or preventing a ceasefire," Biden said in the statement.

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Ethiopia's Current Trajectory Could Lead to Disintegration of State - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and other countries agree that the current trajectory of the conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray and Amhara regions could lead to the disintegration of the state, a senior Biden administration official said.

"Ethiopia's neighbors and Ethiopia's friends farther away agree that there is a grave and growing risk to the stability of Ethiopia - a country of more than 110 million people - and that the current trajectory can lead to the disintegration of the state, which would be disastrous for Ethiopia, for the region and beyond," the official told reporters.

Ethiopia's north has been the center of a conflict between the Ethiopian government, Eritrean government, Tigray People's Liberation Front, and other local forces. The connected

humanitarian crisis there has left up to 900,000 people in famine conditions in the Tigray region alone, more than anywhere else in the world, the official added.

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US to Exempt Humanitarian, Development Efforts in Ethiopia From New Sanctions - Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The new US sanctions program against Ethiopian and Eritrean parties involved in the conflict in the Tigray and Amhara regions will not affect humanitarian and commercial activities, a senior Biden administration official said.

"These sanctions authorities are not directed at the people of Ethiopia or Eritrea. The new sanctions program is deliberately calibrated to mitigate any undue harm to those already suffering from this conflict. In fact, Treasury will issue accompanying general licenses tomorrow to provide clear exemptions for any development, humanitarian, and other assistance efforts, as well as critical commercial activity in Ethiopia and Eritrea," the official said in a call on Thursday. The licenses will authorize the continued flow of food, medicine, COVID-19 assistance, medical devices, and other critical humanitarian supplies to the impacted areas of Ethiopia, the official said.

However, less than 10 percent of needed humanitarian supplies sent to the areas have reached the impacted Tigray region in the last month due to obstruction by parties to the conflict, the official added.

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US Not to Announce Any Individual Sanctions on Ethiopian Conflict Parties Yet - Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The new sanctions program issued by the Biden administration against parties to the conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray and Amhara regions will initially not include names of any person or party sanctioned, a senior administration official said.

"The [Executive Order] that will be announced tomorrow is a broader scope, allowing us to sanction individuals and entities from conflict parties and others fueling the conflict," the official said on Thursday. "We will not yet mention names tomorrow, we are just announcing that the President has signed off on this authority allowing Treasury and the State Department to look at those who are continuing to fuel the conflict."

The official said that they wish to see the parties, which include the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and other local forces, quickly come to the table for a politically negotiated ceasefire and allow the flow of humanitarian supplies to the impacted regions.

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Biden to Allow US Sanctions on Parties Fueling Conflict in Ethiopia - Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is set to approve a new executive order giving the federal government the authority to impose sanctions on the parties involved in the conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia, a senior administration official said. "We will announce that President Biden has approved a new Executive Order establishing a sanctions regime to increase pressure on the parties fueling this conflict [in Tigray] to sit down at the negotiating table, and in the case of Eritrea, withdraw forces," the official told reporters in a call.

The action provides the Departments of Treasury and State the authority to impose sanctions against individuals and entities of the Ethiopian government, the Eritrean government, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and the Amhara regional government if they continue to pursue military conflict over political negotiations, the official added.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden Hosts Leader-Level Meeting of Major Economies on Energy, Climate

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is convening a virtual leader-level meeting of the Major Economies on Energy and Climate (MEF) on Friday, a month and a half before the major UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow.

"At the MEF meeting, the President will emphasize both the urgency and the economic benefits of stronger climate action. He will call on leaders to strengthen their climate ambition heading into COP 26 and in the years beyond," the White House said in a statement.

COP26, also known as Climate Change Conference will be held between October 31 and November 12 in Glasgow, Scotland.

The US government noted that the latest findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released in August and "an accelerating cycle of climate-driven disasters around the world have underscored the urgency of dramatically scaling up action this decade to keep the 1.5-degree goal within reach."

The IPCC said that the global temperature has increased by 0.99 degrees Celsius (1.78 degrees Fahrenheit) in the last 20 years, compared with the 1850-1900 period, and will keep rising and fueling highly destructive natural phenomena. The IPCC also reported that the sea level increased within the last hundred years, and the land biosphere underwent changes due to global warming.

The US government also recalled that Biden returned the US to the Paris Climate Agreement, which was reached within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2015, has the

long-term goal of limiting the global rise in temperature to 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

The Trump administration officially withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2019. On his first day in the White House, Biden announced that the United States would be rejoining the agreement and gained readmission in February.

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RPT: ANALYSIS - AUKUS Aims at Blocking China at Sea, Yet China's Trade With Asia Unlikely to Be Affected

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The newly announced partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia definitely has the aim of blocking China at sea — however, unless the trio opts for open military confrontation, the growing trade between Beijing and the rest of Asia will not be affected, analysts told Sputnik.

On Wednesday evening, US President Joe Biden together with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared the formation of the new AUKUS defense and security partnership, "which will protect and defend ... shared interests in the Indo-Pacific."

The first initiative under the AUKUS alliance will be the creation of nuclear-powered submarine technology for the Royal Australian Navy, so the Australian government decided to abandon the \$66-billion agreement reached with the French company of Naval Group for the construction of diesel-electric submarines.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington, in response to the formation of the AUKUS partnership, urged the countries to get rid of the Cold War mentality and to refrain from creating alliances against others.

"This proves once again that these countries are using nuclear exports as a tool for geopolitical games," the ministry said, adding that any regional mechanism "should not harm interests of third countries."

REAL DETERRENCE

US Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, who served as an adviser to the Trump administration's Acting Pentagon chief, believes that the arrangement is quite real because its basis is "cultural, economic and strategic."

"The unified effort of the expanding submarine fleets is a profoundly important development. China's missile defenses can cope with any challenge on the surface, but they are powerless to cope with modern nuclear-powered subs in deep water. This raises yet again the specter of a truly effective blockade at sea," he told Sputnik.

To cut the story short, this action by the three English-speaking countries represents "real deterrence," he stated.

"Still, none of this should make any difference to RCEP [Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership] and China's growing trade with the rest of Asia. Unless China or the US, U.K. and Australia opt for a military confrontation, the trade will continue," he stated.

When asked how effective the initiative will be in containing China, former CIA station chief and founding member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) group Philip Giraldi told Sputnik that the agreement is totally misplaced since Chinese power is not rooted in the military.

"China is flat-out out-competing us and our allies on the world economic stage, which is where its strength comes from. Once upon a time, the United States excelled at performing competitively, which is how it succeeded Britain as the great global power, but alas, no longer," he told Sputnik.

EXTREMELY DANGEROUS

The newly announced alliance an extremely dangerous development, historian and political commentator Dan Lazare told Sputnik.

"Imagine if Russia, China, and Mexico had entered into an anti-US alliance with the first two vowing to equip the third with the latest nuclear military technology. The US would see it as nothing less than a casus belli and would begin preparing for a showdown. That is precisely what I expect China to do now that it sees US-led forces as closing in for the kill," he explained. He recalled that China, as an emerging great power, claims the same suzerainty that the US claims over its own regional waters.

"Yet as the global hegemon, that's the one concession the US can't afford to grant. Instead, it claims the same right to supervise the South China Sea as, say, the Caribbean because that's what being the sole remaining superpower means, i.e. the ultimate global arbiter of what's permissible and what's not," he said.

Since China can't possibly accede to such a deal, some kind of confrontation seems "inevitable," according to Lazare.

"China will have the immediate military advantage since it will take place in its own backyard. But the US has immense global powers in reserve, so its position should not be underestimated," he said.

Speaking about the reactions of other nations in the region, Lazare replied that they are likely to engage in the usual short-sighted calculus.

"India cannot be entirely displeased since it will allow it to step into a double role as intermediary in the western Pacific and dominant power over the entire Indian Ocean. Since the US needs its help more than ever, it will likely go along. Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia may not be displeased either since the world's growing focus on the region means that their regional leverage can only grow," he said.

Japan, however, must be nervous since it is in the line of fire, while South Korea is no doubt aware that political tensions on the peninsula can only grow, he suggested.

MORE OFFENSIVE THAN DEFENSIVE

The position of the US government toward China looks to be "more offensive than defensive," veteran Pentagon analyst Chuck Spinney told Sputnik.

"It is viewed by the AF [air force] and Navy as an "anti-access/area-denial problem" (to use their term). This problem is one of impeding the free flow of our forces toward China into and through the East and South China Seas. This is a most convenient strategy for justifying business-as-usual huge defense budgets, laden with high-cost cold-war inspired weapons," he explained.

But China's major strategic problem is maintaining access to the world, he believes. So it is easy to bottle up China's seaborne trade with the world by using air and sea interdiction. "Moreover, as far as 'containing' China is concerned, let us not forget that 90% of all China's trade is by sea (mostly with the US and its allies in Europe) and therefore China is highly vulnerable to disruption (note the arrows in this map are only for oil and gas)," he concluded. Meanwhile, David Swanson, the executive director of WorldBeyondWar.org and campaign coordinator for RootsAction.org, told Sputnik that he also believes that the partnership is a dangerous provocation and resembles "offense disguised as defense."

"Australia should be ashamed of acting as an obedient dog of war, as should the UK, and the US should try just once to end a war without increasing military spending, spreading empire, and seeking out new wars," he added.

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RPT - US Civil Rights Leader Applauds Police Chokehold Ban, Urges Congress to Move on Floyd Act

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik), Barrington M. Salmon - The US Justice Department's decision to ban law enforcement from using chokeholds is a welcome step but more needs to do be done to curb police violence against Black people, including the passage of the George Floyd Act, National Urban League CEO and former New Orleans Mayor, Marc Morial, told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, the Justice Department in a memorandum said it implemented department-wide policies banning chokeholds and carotid restraints in addition to no-knock warrants. The memo comes as US law enforcement behavior continues to come under intense scrutiny with 1,000 police killings per year, including 935 in 2021, according to data compiled by The Washington Post.

"The Justice Department's chokehold ban is an important and necessary step to mitigate the alarming and unnecessary increase of police violence against Black and Brown bodies. For far too long, law enforcement officers have caused inexplicable tragedies and atrocities in communities they police with little to no accountability," Morial said. "While we are excited at this step towards progress, now, more than ever, is when we double down on our efforts to call on Congress to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act."

The Floyd bill has been stalled in Congress although media reports on Thursday suggested it could see movement soon. The police reform bill was introduced shortly after Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minnesota, Derek Chauvin, who has been convicted of murder and sentenced to over 20 years in prison.

The civil rights leader said the policy implemented by the Justice Department will help build trust and confidence in communities who have often felt bullied and threatened by law enforcement. Morial, who served as mayor of New Orleans from 1994-2002, said the United States has a dark, discriminatory, and violent history as it pertains to the over-policing of Black and Brown bodies that extends back to slave patrols in the 1700s.

"The brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Elijah McClain and so many others are just a few of the many who have succumbed to the dangerous misuse of law enforcement techniques," he said.

FLOYD ACT PROSPECTS DIM

The Floyd bill, in addition to banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants, if passed would limit the transfer of military-grade equipment to state and local law enforcement. In addition, it would require police departments to use existing federal funds to purchase body cameras. The legislation also aims to hold police accountable in court and make it easier to investigate police misconduct.

Wake Forest University Constitutional Law Professor Kami Chavis, who served as an assistant US Attorney for the District of Columbia, said she continues to hope that communities and stakeholders will be able to reimagine public safety that will truly protect marginalized communities and reduce or eliminate police violence.

"I am hopeful and moderately optimistic. There have been changes because of the protests. They are generating data that I would like to see to in the next five years or so to see if these measures have taken hold," Chavis told Sputnik.

However, she thinks there is little likelihood the bill will pass in the Senate because of intense Republican resistance.

"We have to get the US Senate to pass the [Floyd Act] but there will still be a lot of work that will need to be done at the local level," she said.

What likely needs to happen, Chavis added, is that the Democrats flip more seats in the Senate in the 2022 mid-term elections because overall the tragedy of police violence has still not registered among many.

"There was a national outcry after the George Floyd murder, but there's something deeper in the culture and training that's not translating," Chavis concluded.

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RPT - US, UK, Australia Pact Creates Jobs But Does Little to Deter China – Former Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The trilateral US, UK, Australia defense partnership announced this week, will create jobs in the three nations but stops short of its raison d'etre, deterring China's expansion in the region, veteran diplomat and former Assistant Defense Secretary Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the three nations announced a defense partnership called AUKUS, with the initial task of US and UK backing of Australia's bid to acquire nuclear-propelled submarines.

"This is a sales transaction and supporting technology partnership. It is not an alliance,"

Freeman said. "Only time will tell whether it represents more than a political stunt and jobs program for the US and UK and what its knock-on effects are in both Asia and Europe."

Freeman questioned whether the partnership will enhance efforts by the three nations to deter China's military expansion in the region – an unstated goal of the deal.

Nuclear-powered submarines, Freeman told Sputnik, "will give Australia a wider defense perimeter than it now has but Australia has not committed itself to join a battle over Taiwan or South China Sea claims so this does not add to US deterrence efforts aimed at China in these contexts."

The agreement also threatens to weaken transatlantic defense cooperation by excluding France and therefore threatening an existing \$66 billion contract for France to design and build submarines for Australia, Freeman added.

"French resentment of America's disregard for its defense relationship with Australia and the French military-industrial base will add to the stress the Trump administration's 'America First' policies placed on trans-Atlantic defense cooperation," Freeman said.

In addition, Freeman questioned whether the deal could have unintended consequences for Australia's own military readiness.

"Nuclear submarines are notoriously expensive. Australia's defense burden will rise. Other elements of the country's defense readiness may take a hit as funds are diverted to the submarine project," Freeman said.

A final potential pitfall of the agreement, according to Freeman, could be to weaken the US, Australia, New Zealand collective security agreement (ANZUS), because New Zealand has already announced that it will not permit nuclear-propelled Australian ships to enter its ports.

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46-year-old black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minnesota, Derek Chauvin, who has been convicted of murder and sentenced to over 20 years in prison.

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Minneapolis Police Department Buys 'Not-Reaching Pouches' to Reduce Deadly Traffic Stops

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Minneapolis Police Department said they have purchased not-reaching pouches to help reduce the number of deadly police encounters during traffic stops.

"We recently purchased some Not-Reaching Pouches to help reduce deadly force encounters between law enforcement and citizens during traffic stops. The pouches store a driver's license,

and insurance card in plain sight in the vehicle on an air vent or other visible location," the Minneapolis Police Department said via Twitter.

The police department said in another statement on Twitter that they want to make it easier for law enforcement officers to see when drivers are reaching for their documents.

The announcement comes after several high-profile, deadly police encounters in Minneapolis took place in the past couple of years, including the cases of George Floyd and Daunte Wright. Derek Chauvin along with the three other former-Minneapolis police officers are currently in federal court facing civil rights violation charges. The three officers are trying to sever their cases from Chauvin's, who has already been convicted on state criminal charges for his role in Floyd's death.

Earlier in September, Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison added a first-degree manslaughter charge to the case against former police officer Kimberly Potter who shot and killed Wright after recklessly handling a firearm that she mistook for a taser during a traffic stop.

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US Approves \$500M In Military Sale to Saudi Arabia to Support Copter Fleet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State has approved a possible \$500 million sale to Saudi Arabia to provide maintenance services to the country's helicopter fleet, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a press release.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of Continuation of Maintenance Support Services (MSS) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$500 million," the release said on Thursday.

The maintenance support services contract supports Saudi fleet of Blackhawk, Bell and Schweizer helicopters, including the future fleet of Chinook helicopters, the release added. The contract's vendor is not known at this time, according to the release.

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Texas Governor Says Biden Administration Had Plans to Close Section of US-Mexico Border

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reached out to Texas authorities with plans to close a section of the United States' southern border given the overwhelming number of illegal border crossings, Texas Governor Greg Abbott said.

"Six hours after US Customs and Border Protection requested help from Texas to close ports of entry and secure the border, the Biden Administration has now flip-flopped to a different strategy that abandons border security and instead makes it easier for people to cross illegally and for cartels to exploit the border," Abbott said in a press release on Thursday.

The Texas Department of Public Safety in a separate statement confirmed CBP reached out to the agency requesting assistance to shut down ports of entry in the Del Rio sector of the Texas-Mexico border.

Since October, the Del Rio sector became the second-busiest section for illegal crossings on the US-Mexico border, encountering nearly 215,000 illegal migrants to date. In August, US immigration enforcement apprehended 32,362 illegal migrants in this section.

CBP data showed on Wednesday that 208,887 migrants were apprehended on the US southern border in August, slightly lower compared to the 213,534 migrants apprehended in July.

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US Jails Pakistan National for 12 Years Over Scheme to Unlock 2Mln Phones - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Muhammad Fahd, a dual national of Pakistan and Grenada, has been sentenced to 12 years in prison for running a seven-year scheme of unlocking nearly 2 million AT&T telephones resulting in more than \$200 million in financial losses, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Muhammad Fahd, a citizen of Pakistan and Grenada, was sentenced today to 12 years in prison for his leadership role in a seven-year scheme to unlawfully unlock nearly 2 million phones to defraud AT&T Inc. (AT&T), inflicting more than \$200 million in losses," the release said on Thursday.

The court said the defendant, along with co-conspirators, bribed and recruited AT&T employees in Bothell, Washington, to use their corporate credentials to unlock phones for ineligible customers, the release said.

By unlocking the phones, Fahd made it possible for AT&T account holders to avoid having to pay off their cellular phones after they purchased them with special discounts, the release said. The forensic analysis by AT&T found that the total number of fraudulently unlocked phones was 1,900,033 while the loss amount was \$201,497,430.94, the release added.

Fahd was indicted in 2017 and arrested in Hong Kong in 2018 followed by his extradition to the United States in 2019. He pleaded guilty to wire fraud conspiracy in September 2020, according to the release.

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Ukraine Council of Judges Must Complete Nominations or Risk Derailing Reforms- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian Council of Judges must nominate judges to participate in the country's new Ethics Council lest they risk derailing judicial reform efforts, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"In July, Ukraine enacted an historic law that provides an opportunity for true reform of the judiciary... On September 13, however, Ukraine's Council of Judges refused to nominate Ukrainian judges to participate in the process, a refusal that threatens to derail the promise of real judicial reform in Ukraine. There is still time to save this effort. The Council of Judges can fulfill its obligation to implement the law and put forward nominations," Price said in a statement on Thursday.

The Ethics Council would be composed of three members of the judiciary as well as three international experts, and would be tasked with screening both current and future members of Ukraine's highest court - the High Council of Justice, the statement said.

Price also said the United States remains firmly committed to assisting Ukraine with its reform efforts so that the country can continue on its path toward Euro-Atlantic integration, and that such reforms will bring more jobs, opportunities, fairness and justice to the Ukrainian people.

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US Coast Guard Joins Australia Navy for 3-Day Exercise in South China Sea

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States cutter Munro completed a three-day exercise with the Royal Australian Navy in the South China Sea, the US Coast Guard said in a press release.

"The joint training engagement included joint operations, professional exchanges, and multi-unit maneuvering at sea to strengthen interoperability between the US Coast Guard and Royal Australian Navy," the release said on Thursday.

Munro, a 418-foot national security cutter, departed its home port of Alameda in July for a months-long deployment to the Western Pacific. The three day exercise in the South China Sea concluded on Monday, the release said.

The release mentioned the Coast Guard's "long history of cooperation with the Royal Australian Navy," as part of the Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordinating Group or P-QUAD linking the United States, Australia, New Zealand and France.

However, the release made no mention the trilateral US, UK and Australian agreement announced on Wednesday to provide Australia with nuclear propelled submarines.

The deal blindsided France, prompting condemnation from French officials and the cancellation of a Washington gala to celebrate the nation's longtime alliance with the US, according to media reports.

The agreement threatened to scuttle a \$90 billion contract for France to design and build submarines for Australia, analysts said.

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PREVIEW - Biden Hosts Leader-Level Meeting of Major Economies on Energy, Climate on Friday

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The Trump administration officially withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2019. On his first day in the White House, Biden announced that the United States would be rejoining the agreement and gained readmission in February.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) -

US-UK-AUSTRALIA DEFENSE DEAL

* The Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) defense pact was not created with the intent to counter any particular country in the Indo-Pacific region, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday when asked if the trilateral agreement risked raising tensions with China.

* Australia regrets China has not taken up invitations for high-level talks on a range of matters including the Indo-Pacific region, Foreign Minister Marise Payne said alongside Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton and their US counterparts.

* The United States engaged with leaders in France on the submarine pact with Australia, and has plenty of shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday the United States does not require any reciprocal actions from its partners in the AUKUS defense agreement.

* The US and Australia have signed a classified agreement of intent on strategic capabilities cooperation as part of a deeper scientific and technological alliance, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said.

ELECTIONS IN RUSSIA

* There was no complete unanimity in the European Parliament on the report on the elections in Russia, and some of the EU lawmakers can "collect the remnants of common sense," Vladimir Chizhov, Russia's permanent representative to the EU, said.

* Moscow will firmly rebuff interference in national issues, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, commenting on the report of the European Parliament, which contains a call to prepare for non-recognition of the election results in Russia.

* Russia has presented to the United States all the information to substantiate its accusations of election interference, including IP addresses, therefore Washington cannot get away just denying the claims, Zakharova said.

* The Russian Investigative Committee opened a criminal probe into inducement to take part in riots in the period of elections to the Russian lower chamber through a network of Telegram channels, committee spokeswoman Svetlana Petrenko said.

SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

* Several rockets fell in one of the districts of the Afghan capital city of Kabul, the Tolo News broadcaster reported.

* The International Monetary Fund's engagement with Afghanistan remains suspended due to the lack of clarity on international recognition of the government, but the organization stands ready to work to resolve the matter to stave off a looming humanitarian crisis, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said.

* Obligations to receive refugees from Afghanistan should be assumed by the Western countries responsible for the situation in this country, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Russia welcomes the fact that work is underway to restore the operation of the Kabul airport, Zakharova said.

WORLD BANK'S FINDINGS ON CHINA

* A probe by the World Bank Group alleges that China pressed them to boost their Doing Business scores, including exerting pressure on then-President Jim Yong Kim, a report released on Thursday detailing the probe's findings said.

* The World Bank said in a report on Thursday that its investigation into the actions of Kristalina Georgieva - the organization's CEO from January 2017 to June 2019 - and her adviser alleges that they pressed for specific changes to the data points on China in two of the World Bank's Doing Business reports.

* Georgieva disapproved of the World Bank's findings alleging she pressed for changes to China's score in the influential Doing Business ranking for 2018 during her role as CEO of the organization.

PUTIN'S COVID-19 SELF-ISOLATION

* Russian President Vladimir Putin will stay on self-isolation for at least one week, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

* The coronavirus outbreak in the entourage of Putin was detected earlier this month, Peskov said.

* The COVID-19 infected people in the inner circle of Putin did not get re-vaccinated in time, Peskov told Sputnik.

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French Mission in US Cancels Reception Over US-Australia Submarines Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Embassy of France in Washington canceled a reception dedicated to the historical anniversary amid tensions over the United States' decision to help Australia deploy nuclear-powered submarines, the New York Times reported on Thursday, citing French officials.

The new Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) defense pact forced Canberra to give up on a \$66 billion contract with France to develop 12 state-of-the-art conventionally powered attack submarines, as the defensive alliance promises to enhance Australia's fleet with nuclear-powered submarines. A former French ambassador to the United States called the move a stab in the back.

The French embassy planned to hold a gala to commemorate the 240th Anniversary of the Battle of the Capes - one of the major naval battles during the American Revolutionary War in September of 1781, the report said. The reception was supposed to take place both on the premises of the embassy and onboard a French frigate in the city of Baltimore, the report added.

However, France decided to cancel the event after the AUKUS pact announcement despite having sent one of its senior military officials to the United States for the occasion.

French officials in Washington accused the Biden administration of hiding information about the agreement and undermining the alliance between the two countries, while US government officials said they discussed the matter with their French counterparts.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said earlier on Thursday that the United States is engaged with the leaders in France on the submarine pact with Australia, noting that the two countries have plenty of shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Lawyer Representing Hillary Clinton's Campaign in 2016 Indicted For Lying to FBI

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – A US grand jury has indicted Michael Sussmann, a prominent lawyer and former representative of Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign, for making a false statement to the FBI, according to a court document.

It is alleged by the indictment that Sussmann's statement to the FBI General Counsel and other FBI personnel was "intentionally false and misleading" because the defendant didn't disclose that he was acting on behalf of several clients, including the Hillary Clinton Presidential Campaign.

"Sussmann's lie was material because, among other reasons, Sussmann's false statement misled the FBI General Counsel and other FBI personnel concerning the political nature of his work and deprived the FBI of information that might have permitted it more fully to assess and uncover the origins of the relevant data and technical analysis, including the identities and motivations and of Sussmann's clients," the indictment said.

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Homeland Security Warns of Violence Ahead of 'Justice for J6' Rally at US Capital - Memo

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Department of Homeland Security's intelligence office issued a memorandum warning interagency partners about online chatter encouraging violence in the US capital a day before the Justice for J6 rally, CNN reported on Thursday citing an unclassified intelligence briefing.

"We are aware of a small number of recent online threats of violence referencing the planned rally, including online discussions encouraging violence the day before the rally," the memorandum said as quoted by CNN.

There have been discussions on social media about storming the US Capitol building on Friday night, a day before Saturday's rally, and attacking Jewish institutions, US elected officials and so-called liberal churches, the report said.

US officials are concerned it will be challenging to monitor activity if protesters use encrypted communication platforms to coordinate acts of violence, the report said.

Moreover, the Department of Homeland Security is especially concerned about the risk of further violence erupting if demonstrators at a counter-rally on Saturday at Freedom Plaza in Washington clash with the Justice for J6 protesters.

The rally, organized by the Look Ahead America group supporting former President Donald Trump, intends to bring public attention and support to some 600 arrested, kept in detention and charged with crimes in relation to the January 6 events at the Capitol. The rally is expected to gather about 500 people.

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Obese US Children Get Heavier During Pandemic by 1-to-1.2 Pounds Per Month - Report

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - An analysis of body mass index data from more than 400,000 Americans ages 2 to 19 showed children who were obese when the coronavirus pandemic began gained an average of 1-to-1.2 pounds per month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said in a report on Thursday.

"Persons with moderate or severe obesity gained on average 1.0 and 1.2 pounds per month, respectively," the report said. "Weight gain at this rate over 6 months is estimated to result in 6.1 and 7.6 pounds, respectively, compared with 2.7 pounds in a person with healthy weight."

CDC said it based the report on body mass index data from IQVIA's Ambulatory Electronic Medical Records database, which is compiled from data submitted by approximately 100,000 health care providers affiliated with about 800 ambulatory sites in all 50 states.

Among a cohort of 432,302 children, the rate of body mass index increase approximately doubled during the pandemic, the report said.

The report examined data from March to November 2020, with obesity rates for children initially averaging about 16 percent. The period coincided with schools closing throughout the United States.

As a result, children and adolescents forced to study at home might have experienced circumstances that accelerated weight gain, including increased stress, irregular mealtimes, less access to nutritious foods, increased screen time, and fewer opportunities for physical activity, the report said.

The findings underscore the importance of efforts to prevent excess weight gain during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as during future public health emergencies, including increased access to efforts that promote healthy behaviors, according to the report.

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US, Russia Still Discussing Cybersecurity at Diplomatic Level - White House

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia continue to engage on the issue of cybersecurity concerns on a diplomatic level, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said during a press briefing on Thursday.

"I think, as the President said at the time, we didn't expect this to be a light switch that would happen overnight. There's ongoing discussions, ongoing conversations at a diplomatic level, and that's something our national security team is engaged with, but beyond that, I don't have another update from here on the progress," Psaki said in response to a request to provide an update on the US-Russia strategic stability dialogue.

In June, US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed during their summit in Geneva to hold bilateral dialogues about strategic stability issues, including the issue of cybersecurity.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said last Thursday that the two countries will be engaging in new cybersecurity talks in the near future, but noted that the United States remains too focused on the areas that interest them but do not interest Russia.

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Biden Says 'Tired' of Super-Rich Dodging Taxes, Getting Tax Breaks

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said Thursday super-rich Americans were evading about \$160 billion a year collectively in taxes and he was determined not to let them and their heavyweight companies get any more tax breaks, which he argued should go to the middle class instead.

"Let me ask you this: where is it written that all the tax breaks in the American tax code go to corporations at the very top?" Biden said in a live-streamed speech from the White House. "I think it's enough. I'm tired of it. For me, it's pretty simple: It's about time working people got the tax breaks in this country."

Biden's remarks came as Democrat lawmakers proposed to Congress this week that the US corporate tax be increased to 26.5% from 21%.

The overhaul in US taxes, the first in three decades, also proposed a 3-percentage-point surtax be applied on top earners and a hike of up to 5-percentage points be placed on capital gains taxes.

Since he took office in January, Biden has asked the wealthy to pay their "fair share" to fund his administration's infrastructure and welfare spending plans, totaling about \$4 trillion. The president laments that some of the richest US companies and citizens pay virtually no taxes by exploiting loopholes or basing their tax jurisdictions in countries with excessively generous tax rates.

On Thursday, he reinforced his campaign against these groups. "Fifty-five of the most profitable corporations in America paid zero in federal income taxes [despite making] an amount of \$240 billion in profit."

Biden also said that without getting monthly details on the bank accounts of the rich — another plan of his — "you can't tell if they're cheating."

"That's how many of the top 1% get away with paying virtually nothing that is estimated by serious economists to be about \$160 billion that is collectively owed," he said.

Biden also alluded to the corporate tax breaks approved by his predecessor Donald Trump as undeserved. "Almost \$2 trillion worth of tax cuts under the Trump era was never paid for in the first place," he said.

Trump dropped the top tax rate to 37% for individuals from 39.6% and reduced the corporate rate from 35% to 21%.

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Pelosi Says She Invited UK Prime Minister to Meeting With Congressional Leaders This Month

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday that she held talks with UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and invited him to participate a meeting with congressional leaders later in September.

"It was my honor to personally invite the Prime Minister to a bipartisan leadership meeting in the United States Capitol when he travels to the United States later this month," Pelosi said in a statement.

Pelosi said she discussed with Johnson climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as bilateral issues and mutual commitment to international security.

"On COVID-19, I complimented the Prime Minister for his leadership in the fight, as we all work to turn the corner on the pandemic," Pelosi said. "In the interest of global security, I commended the Prime Minister on his leadership in working with President [Joe] Biden and Australian Prime Minister [Scott] Morrison on the recently announced trilateral 'AUKUS' [Australian-UK-US] security partnership."

On Wednesday, Morrison together with Johnson and Biden declared the forming of the new AUKUS defense and security partnership to protect shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.

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Austin When Asked About China Says AUKUS Pact Not Aimed at Any Country

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) defense pact was not created with the intent to counter any particular country in the Indo-Pacific region, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday when asked if the trilateral agreement risked raising tensions with China.

"On the issue of China, let me just emphasize upfront that this agreement, this relationship is not aimed at anything or anyone," Austin said during a press conference alongside Secretary of State Antony Blinken and their Australian counterparts. "The intent here is to help improve our trilateral cooperation and our capabilities across the board. The first step is to focus on helping Australia acquire a nuclear-powered submarine capability."

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Australia Regrets China Has Not Taken Up Invitation to Dialogue - Foreign Minister

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Australia regrets China has not taken up invitations for high-level talks on a range of matters including the Indo-Pacific region, Foreign Minister Marise Payne said on Thursday alongside Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton and their US counterparts.

"I regret that it's consistently not taken up," Payne said during a press conference when asked if there has been any progress on Australia's effort seeking dialogue with China.

On Wednesday, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom announced a trilateral defense pact to enhance collaboration on mutual challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, a thinly veiled bid to counter China.

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US, UK, Australia Pact Creates Jobs But Does Little to Deter China – Former Official

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The trilateral US, UK, Australia defense partnership announced this week, will create jobs in the three nations but stops short of its raison d'etre, deterring China's expansion in the region, veteran diplomat and former Assistant Defense Secretary Chas Freeman told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, the three nations announced a defense partnership called AUKUS, with the initial task of US and UK backing of Australia's bid to acquire nuclear-propelled submarines.

"This is a sales transaction and supporting technology partnership. It is not an alliance," Freeman said. "Only time will tell whether it represents more than a political stunt and jobs program for the US and UK and what its knock-on effects are in both Asia and Europe."

Freeman questioned whether the partnership will enhance efforts by the three nations to deter China's military expansion in the region – an unstated goal of the deal.

Nuclear-powered submarines, Freeman told Sputnik, "will give Australia a wider defense perimeter than it now has but Australia has not committed itself to join a battle over Taiwan or South China Sea claims so this does not add to US deterrence efforts aimed at China in these contexts."

The agreement also threatens to weaken transatlantic defense cooperation by excluding France and therefore threatening an existing \$66 billion contract for France to design and build submarines for Australia, Freeman added.

"French resentment of America's disregard for its defense relationship with Australia and the French military-industrial base will add to the stress the Trump administration's 'America First' policies placed on trans-Atlantic defense cooperation," Freeman said.

In addition, Freeman questioned whether the deal could have unintended consequences for Australia's own military readiness.

"Nuclear submarines are notoriously expensive. Australia's defense burden will rise. Other elements of the country's defense readiness may take a hit as funds are diverted to the submarine project," Freeman said.

A final potential pitfall of the agreement, according to Freeman, could be to weaken the US, Australia, New Zealand collective security agreement (ANZUS), because New Zealand has already announced that it will not permit nuclear-propelled Australian ships to enter its ports.

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US Engaged With Leaders in France About Submarine Deal With Australia - White House

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States engaged with leaders in France on the submarine pact with Australia, and has plenty of shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

The new AUKUS defensive pact forced Canberra to give up on a \$66 billion contract with France to develop 12 state-of-the-art conventionally powered attack submarines, as the defensive alliance promises to enhance Australia's fleet with nuclear-powered submarines. A former French ambassador to the US called the move a stab in the back.

"We are engaged closely and we were engaged in advance of this announcement with leaders in France about this purchase. They were aware in advance of the announcement," Psaki said.

"We cooperate closely with France. As the President said yesterday, we have a range of shared priorities in the Indo-Pacific and that will certainly continue. We don't see this from our end as a regional divide."

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Biden Not Looking to Escalate Cold War With China - White House

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not seeking to heighten the Cold War with China, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Thursday.

When asked whether Biden is looking to escalate the Cold War with China, Psaki stated, "No."

"This partnership announced yesterday is not about any one country, this is about advancing our strategic interest, the strategic interest of the United States upholding the international rules-based order and promoting peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific," Psaki said.

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Blinken Says No Reciprocal Requirements With Partners in AUKUS Defense Pact

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday the United States does not require any reciprocal actions from its partners in the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) defense agreement.

"From my perspective, there are no follow-on reciprocal requirements of any kind," Blinken said during a press conference alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and their Australian counterparts. "This is a partnership, this is a cooperative agreement with us, with Australia, with the United Kingdom."

The United States will deliver a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia as part of the agreement to increase collaboration efforts in the Indo-Pacific region, a thinly veiled bid to counter China.

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Austin Says Has Confidence in General Milley After Book Revelations About Trump

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Thursday he continues to have confidence in Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley following revelations in an upcoming book about his previously unpublicized contacts with China.

The upcoming book "Peril" reveals Milley reached out to his Chinese counterpart to assure them an attack from the United States was not imminent after Beijing worried that Trump planned an attack at the end of his time in office.

"I have confidence in General Milley," Austin said during a press conference.

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Blinken Says France Vital Ally in Indo-Pacific, US in Touch With Counterparts About AUKUS

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has been in consultations with France over the last 48 hours to consult on the newly-announced Australian-UK-US (AUKUS) defense pact, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

The new defensive pact forced Canberra to give up on a \$66 billion contract with France to develop 12 state-of-the-art conventionally powered attack submarines, as the defensive alliance promises to enhance Australia's fleet with nuclear-powered submarines. A former French ambassador to the US called the move a stab in the back.

"France in particular is a vital partner on this... we've been in touch with our French counterparts in the last 24 to 48 hours to discuss AUKUS," Blinken said during a press conference alongside US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and their Australian counterparts.

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US, Australia to Remain Vigilant About China's Attempts to Undermine World Order – Austin

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The US and Australia will remain vigilant about China's attempts to undermine the established international order, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Thursday as the two countries joined in a new alliance alongside the UK to counteract Beijing.

"We will remain clear-eyed in our view of Beijing's efforts to undermine the established international order," Austin said at a press briefing.

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US, Australia Sign Classified Statement on Strategic Capabilities Cooperation – Payne

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The US and Australia have signed a classified agreement of intent on strategic capabilities cooperation as part of a deeper scientific and technological alliance, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said on Thursday.

"We further advanced our [US-Australia] cooperation today in science, technology, strategic capabilities in defense industrial base integration, which are the key pillars of our alliance. This included signing a classified statement of intent on strategic capabilities cooperation and implementation," Payne said at a press briefing.

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US, Australia to Enhance Defense Cooperation, Deepen Alliance in Indo-Pacific – Payne

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The US and Australia have agreed to boost their military cooperation and deepen joint activities in the Indo-Pacific, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said on Thursday.

"I'm proud to announce that Australia and the United States will be significantly enhancing our force posture cooperation, increasing interoperability and deepening alliance activities in the Indo Pacific," Payne said at a press briefing in Washington.

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Facebook Says Removed Accounts Linked to German Group For Sharing Health Misinformation

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Facebook has removed accounts connected to a German anti-lockdown group sharing health misinformation and hate speech on their platforms, Head of Security Policy Nathaniel Gleicher said in a statement on Thursday.

"We removed a network of Facebook and Instagram accounts, Pages and Groups for engaging in coordinated efforts to repeatedly violate our Community Standards, including posting harmful health misinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence. We also blocked their domains from being shared on our platform. This network was operated by individuals associated with the Querdenken movement in Germany, which is linked to off-platform violence and other social harms," Gleicher said.

The people behind the activity used both authentic and duplicate accounts to post and amplify content that violates Facebook's policies, including promotion of a conspiracy that the German government's COVID-19 restrictions are part of a larger plan to strip citizens of their freedoms and basic rights, Gleicher added.

He also said that the group typically portrayed violence as the way to combat the measures and that public reporting indicated that the group engaged in physical violence against journalists, police and medical practitioners in Germany.

Gleicher said that the network consistently violated Facebook's rules against harmful health misinformation, incitement of violence, bullying, harassment and hate speech, and that the company repeatedly took action against them. While not all Querdenken content is banned, Facebook will continue to monitor the situation and take action if additional violations occur.

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Ex-Officer Chauvin Pleads Not Guilty in Police Brutality Case Involving Teen - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin pleaded not guilty on Thursday to using excessive force against a Black teenager in 2017, media reported.

Chauvin pleaded not guilty to allegations he violated a 14-year-old's civil rights during an encounter in 2017, ABC News said.

The outlet cited the indictment as alleging that Chauvin had grabbed the teenager's throat, hit him on the head with a flashlight and knelt on his neck and upper back while he was handcuffed and no longer resisting.

The report, citing police department records, said at least 18 complaints were filed against Chauvin during his 19 years of service.

In June, a US court sentenced Chauvin to 22.5 years in prison for the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. The 46-year-old Black man was killed in police custody after Chauvin knelt on his neck for around 9 minutes.

Floyd's death was caught on video and sparked widespread protests and riots over officer-involved killings of Blacks and systemic racism in the United States

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US Congressman Opposes Resettlement of Afghan Nationals in Montana - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Rosendale said on Thursday that he opposes the Biden administration's plan to resettle Afghan nationals in his state of Montana.

"Today, I learned that 75 refugees from Afghanistan will be arriving in Montana. I strongly oppose the resettlement of these Afghan nationals in Montana," Rosendale said.

Data from the White House, cited by US media on Thursday, showed the places the Biden administration plans to resettle the first group of nearly 37,000 Afghan nationals throughout the United States.

Rosendale added in subsequent messages on Twitter that it appears unlikely the Biden administration properly vetted the Afghan nationals and that it is his duty as an elected representative to Congress to protect the citizens he represents from things compromising their safety.

Rosendale also said that he has previously advocated that the US try and resettle Afghans in other countries nearby Afghanistan that share their values and culture, especially if proper vetting cannot be ensured.

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US Sanctions 5 Individuals in Turkey Over Links to Al-Qaeda – Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury on Thursday added five individuals to its Specially Designated Nationals list for their alleged links to Al-Qaeda (banned in Russia). Among the individuals designated, two are nationals of Egypt and three of Turkey, according to a Treasury press release.

The US Treasury clarified that the designated individuals provided a range of financial and travel support to Al-Qaeda which was designated as a terrorist group on September 23, 2001.

One of the designated individuals, Majdi Salim is the former Emir of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (banned in Russia) and one of the primary facilitators of Al-Qaeda activities in Turkey, the release said.

Muhammad Nasr Al-Din Al-Ghazlani is an Egyptian national and a Turkey-based financial courier for Al-Qaeda needs, including financing the families of imprisoned members of the terrorist group, according to the release.

Two Turkish nationals, Nurettin Muslihan and Cevrail Guzel were responsible for maintaining contact with Al-Qaeda's senior leadership and providing material support in an effort to aid the group's activities, the release said.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the US intelligence community assesses the al-Qaeda terrorist group does not have the capability to orchestrate cross-border attacks following its significant degradation.

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World Bank, IMF, WHO, WTO Meet With Pharma CEOs to Discuss COVID-19 Vaccines Distribution

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) along with the World Bank Group, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), the so-called COVID-19 Task Force, met CEOs of leading vaccine manufacturers to discuss accelerating vaccine access to lower-income countries and African states, according to a statement published Thursday.

"The heads of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank Group, World Health Organization and World Trade Organization met with the CEOs of leading vaccine manufacturing companies to discuss strategies to improve the access to COVID-19 vaccines, especially in low- and lower middle-income countries and in Africa," the statement, published on the Task Force's website, read.

No specific pharmaceutical firms or executives were mentioned in the statement.

The Task Force called for urgent steps, which would allow to achieve the target of vaccinating at least 40% population around the globe by the end of 2021, it added.

"Task Force members welcomed the willingness of the CEOs to work collectively with them to end vaccine inequity and their readiness to form a technical working group with the Task Force

to exchange and coordinate information on vaccine production and deliveries,” the statement added.

The statement then spelled out a set of recommendations to the unnamed manufacturers to work more closely with the COVAX scheme and the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust, to eliminate export restrictions, streamline regulatory acceptance and others.

Pharmaceutical giants and governments in the US and EU have been roundly criticized for refusing to waive intellectual property patents for vaccine production, which would unlock manufacturing potential for lower-income countries. The UN recently highlighted the stark imbalance in COVID-19 vaccine access, with around 90% of the 5 billion shots delivered in just 10 countries.

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Guterres, Johnson to Hold Informal Climate Leaders Informal Round Table Monday - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will hold an informal round table on climate action at the beginning of next week, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

“On Monday 9:00 a.m., the Secretary-General and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the Northern Ireland Boris Johnson will hold an informal climate leaders’ round table on climate action,” Dujarric said. “The round table will address the gaps that remain on the actions urgently needed from national governments especially the G20 on mitigation, financing and adaptation.”

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Fitch Downgrades China Growth, Upgrades Russia's in Revised 2021 Forecast

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The world economy is expected to expand at a slower rate of 6% in 2021 versus a previously forecast 6.3%, Fitch Ratings said in its latest outlook that downgraded growth for China while raising it for Russia and several other countries. “World GDP to grow by 6% in 2021, slower than our 6.3% growth forecast in the June Global Economic Outlook (GEO),” Fitch Ratings said on Thursday. “Supply constraints are limiting the pace of recovery. A greater share of demand growth is being reflected in price increases and US inflation forecasts have been revised up again.”

An unprecedented boom in consumer demand for durable goods has stretched the capacity of global suppliers and supply bottlenecks are curbing the rate of output expansion and creating near-term inflationary pressures, Fitch Ratings Chief Economist Brian Coulton said.

"These pressures should ease significantly in 2022 as demand growth moderates and supply responds," Coulton said. "But price pressures are shifting the tone of the policy debate. Fiscal and monetary policy support for growth will start to wane next year."

In line with its global revision, Fitch Ratings said it had downgraded growth for China's GDP to 8.1% for 2021 - from its previous 8.4% estimate - to account for the property sector slowdown in the second largest economy.

"We have also lowered forecasts for some other Asian economies following a rise in coronavirus cases and renewed restrictions," Fitch said. "But we have raised eurozone 2021 growth to 5.2% from 5.0%. Poland, Turkey, Mexico, Russia and South Africa have also seen forecast upgrades."

In the case of the United States and Europe, while progress with COVID-19 vaccine rollouts were limiting new infections, the virus' dynamics were still withholding growth prospects and constraining labor supply, Fitch Ratings said.

Near-term inflation pressures in the United States have intensified, with the cost of processed inputs for US firms rising at the fastest rate in 40 years, it also said.

"Higher costs have been passed onto consumers, with US core CPI inflation at its highest rate since the early 1990s. Goods price inflation should recede next year, but gradually rising US services inflation will prevent US core inflation falling below 3% by end-2022. Inflation pressures are less intense in other advanced economies, but end-2021 CPI forecasts have been revised up widely," it added.

Fitch Ratings forecast that the Federal Reserve will taper its stimulus for the US economy by November and carry out two rate hikes in 2023. The Bank of England was also expected to hike rates within the next two years, it said.

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US Airline Passengers Triple in July From Prior Year - Transportation Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US airlines carried 207 percent more travelers in July than in July 2020, but passenger loads remained 15 percent below levels in pre-pandemic July 2019, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) said on Thursday.

"The large airlines carried 73.4 million passengers in July 2021 (preliminary), compared to 23.9 million passengers in July 2020, which was the lowest monthly total in BTS records dating back to 1974," a press release explaining the poll said.

Data in monthly BTS reports is compiled from 24 US airlines that carry more than 90 percent of all passengers, the release said.

The impact of the novel coronavirus Delta variant did not become obvious until late July, when daily cases began approaching 100,000, compared with less than 20,000 at the beginning of the month, according to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Georgieva Says Disagrees With World Bank Probe Alleging She Tried to Change China's Score

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva on Thursday disapproved of the World Bank's findings alleging she pressed for changes to China's score in the influential Doing Business ranking for 2018 during her role as CEO of the organization.

"I disagree fundamentally with the findings and interpretations of the Investigation of Data Irregularities as it relates to my role in the World Bank's Doing Business report of 2018," Georgieva said in a statement. "I have already had an initial briefing with the IMF's Executive Board on this matter."

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World Bank Probe Alleges Ex-CEO, Adviser Pushed for Changes of Data Points on China

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The World Bank said in a report on Thursday that its investigation into the actions of Kristalina Georgieva - the organization's CEO from January 2017 to June 2019 - and her adviser alleges that they pressed for specific changes to the data points on China in two of the World Bank's Doing Business reports.

"The changes to China's data in Doing Business 2018 appear to be the product of two distinct types of pressure applied by Bank leadership on the Doing Business team: (1) pressure - both direct and indirect applied by senior staff in the Office of the President, presumably at the direction of President [Jim Yong] Kim, to change the report's methodology in an effort to boost China's; and (2) pressure applied by CEO Georgieva and her advisor, Mr. [Simeon] Djankov, to make specific changes to China's data points in an effort to increase to increase its ranking at precisely the same time the country was expected to play a key role in the Bank's capital increase campaign," the report said.

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Most Americans Agree With US Exit From Afghanistan Even if Pullout Was Mishandled – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – A majority of US adults approve of the US departure from Afghanistan, although the public remains divided over the Biden administration's management of the withdrawal, a Monmouth University poll said on Thursday.

"Two-thirds of Americans (66%) approve of the decision to withdraw the US presence in Afghanistan. Just 27% disapprove," a press release explaining the poll said. Approval for the pullout, regardless of how the actual exit was handled, comes from about 3 in 4 Democrats (76%) and independents (72%) but just under half of Republicans (47%), the release said.

At the same time, Americans are divided over how the US managed the withdraw, with 48% saying President Joe Biden seriously mishandled the departure of US forces and 49% saying Biden did the best he could in a bad situation, the release added.

"Most Americans approve of ending the war in Afghanistan, but the images of a disorderly withdrawal did not help Biden at a time when the rise in Covid cases is already unsettling the public," Monmouth Polling director Patrick Murray said in the release.

The poll found a dip in public sentiment that the country is heading in the right direction 29%, compared with 65% who say the US is on the wrong track, the release said.

In April, the right direction rating hit an eight-year high of 46% but has declined since then, with a July reading of 38%.

Biden's overall job approval rating stood at 46% with 46% disapproval in the Monmouth poll of 802 adults, which was conducted from September 9 to 13, according to the release.

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US Lawyer With Democratic Ties May Be Indicted for Lying to FBI in Russia's Probe- Reports

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Michael Sussmann, a prominent cybersecurity lawyer and former representative of the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 Russian hacking probe, may face indictment by a grand jury for allegedly making a false statement to FBI, Fox News reported on Thursday.

The case for the possible indictment will be provided by the US Special Counsel John Durham in a matter of the next days, if not hours, and will focus on the September 19, 2016 conversation between Sussmann and an FBI employee, the report said.

On Wednesday, Sussmann's lawyers denied any accusations and said that their client has not committed any crime and, moreover, if he is charged - he will be acquitted, the report said.

Durham will also submit an official report to the Justice Department with some parts of it containing unfavorable information about the FBI, the sources said.

Durham was appointed as a Special Counsel by former US Attorney General William Barr in May 2019 to review the FBI's actions in the alleged Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on a former Trump campaign adviser. He was supposed to present the results of his investigation by the end of this summer but this term was pushed back.

In August, the Wall Street Journal reported that Durham's team of prosecutors also focused the probe on individuals outside the FBI who provided information that helped fuel the 2016 investigation into the alleged collusion and whether tipsters knew the information they provided was false.

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World Bank Probe Alleges China Pressed to Boost Their 'Doing Business' Score - Findings

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - A probe by the World Bank Group alleges that China pressed them to boost their Doing Business scores, including exerting pressure on then-President Jim Yong Kim, a report released on Thursday detailing the probe's findings said. "Beginning as early as May 2017 and continuing through the Doing Business 2018 cycle, high-ranking Chinese government officials repeatedly expressed their concerns to President [Jim Yong] Kim and other senior Bank officials that the country's ranking in the Doing Business report – 78 in Doing Business 2017 – did not accurately reflect its economic reforms," the report said.

During a meeting between Kim's Chief of Staff and other senior staffers with the Development Economics Vice President and Doing Business leadership, they pushed the Doing Business leadership to incorporate methodological changes to the report that would boost China's ranking, it added.

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Victims of Madoff Ponzi Scheme Receive Additional \$568Mln Distribution - Justice Dept

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Nearly 31,000 victims of Bernie Madoff's ponzi scheme have received an additional \$568 million in financial recovery payments, the US Justice Department said in a statement issued Thursday.

"The Department of Justice announced today that the Madoff Victim Fund (MVF) began its seventh distribution of approximately \$568 million in funds forfeited to the U.S. government in connection with the Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC (BLMIS) fraud scheme, bringing the total distributed to over \$3.7 billion to nearly 40,000 victims worldwide," the statement said.

The payment will be sent to 31,000 victims across the globe, and for more than 2,600 of those victims, it will be their first distribution received from the Madoff Victim Fund. This seventh installment will bring the victims' total recovery to about 81 percent, the Justice Department added.

Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison in 2009 for his crimes, which the Justice Department calls the largest fraudulent scheme in history. He died at the age of 82 from natural causes in April, 2021.

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US Sanctions 4 Columbia Nationals, Their Organizations for Drug Trafficking - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions against four Colombian nationals and their drug trafficking organization for involvement in the transfer of narcotics, the US Treasury Department announced on Thursday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) identified Zulma Maria Musso Torres (Musso Torres) as a significant foreign narcotics trafficker pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act)," the release said. "Musso Torres... is the leader of an international drug trafficking organization (DTO) primarily based in Santa Marta, Magdalena, Colombia."

The Treasury Department explained that Torres' drug trafficking organization controls maritime corridors in northern Colombia and collects a per kilogram tax from drug traffickers for secure passage of multi-ton shipments of narcotics.

The Treasury Department went on to say that it also targets with sanctions Torres' sons and husband for assisting her in the criminal enterprise.

"Musso Torres is assisted by her two sons, Washington Antunez Musso (Antunez Musso) and Juan Carlos Reales Britto (Reales Britto), and her husband, Luis Antonio Bermudez Mejia (Bermudez Mejia), who were also designated today for providing material support to the narcotics trafficking activities of Musso Torres," the release said.

The sons report directly to Musso Torres and assist her drug trafficking activities at seaports and maritime locations in the Magdalena, Atlantico, and La Guajira departments of Colombia, the release also said.

The Treasury Department noted that the organization facilitates the transportation of multi-ton quantities of cocaine from Colombia to the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico.

The Treasury Department said it also designated two Colombian entities - Exclusive Import Export S.A.S. and Poligono Santa Marta S.A.S. - that are owned, controlled, directed by, or act for or on behalf of, Antunez Musso and Reales Britto," the release said.

Since June 2000, more than 2,200 entities and individuals have been sanctioned under the Kingpin Act, according to the Treasury Department.

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Pakistan Sees Uptick in ISIS-K Incidents Since US Pullout From Afghanistan - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - Since the US withdrawal of its troops out of Afghanistan, Pakistan has noticed a rise in incidents related to terrorist groups, including the Islamic State-Khorasan (banned in Russia), Ambassador of Pakistan to the United States Dr. Asad Majeed Khan said on Thursday.

"We are [recently] seeing more and more foreign-based terrorism incidents being taken against Pakistan... that includes TTP [Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, a terrorist group banned in Russia], that

includes ISIS-K," Khan said speaking at the discussion organized by the Stimson Center on the impact of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

The Taliban (a terrorist group, banned in Russia) seized Kabul on August 15 and completed the takeover of Afghanistan several weeks later by taking control over the Panjshir province. On September 7, the movement announced the composition of the interim government of Afghanistan, led by Mohammad Hasan Akhund, who served as a foreign minister during the first Taliban rule and has been under UN sanctions since 2001.

Pakistan was among the first nations to launch air operations to Afghanistan along with Qatar, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, and the United Arab Emirates.

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IMF Stands Ready to Engage With New Lebanese Government – Spokesman

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is ready to engage with the new government of Lebanon in order to support the nation's economy, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters on Thursday.

"We have had some courtesy calls with members of the new government in Lebanon. We stand ready to engage with the new government in the period ahead," Rice said in a press briefing without providing additional details on specific timelines.

Speaking on measures of support that the IMF providing to Lebanon and other countries, he reminded that the fund announced the historic \$650 billion Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) allocation in late August to all member countries.

"It is for the government to decide how their SDRs should be used, but it is important that it be used to help replenish depleted Central Bank reserves," Rice said.

The new government of Lebanon, led by Prime Minister Najib Mikati, was formed late last week.

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Biden Reaffirms Support for Voting Rights on Eve of Constitution, Citizenship Day

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Friday reaffirmed his administration's efforts to protect voting rights in the United States after issuing an earlier order proclaiming Constitution Day and Citizenship Day as national holidays.

"Today, we are in the midst of grave attempts to suppress and subvert the right to vote in free and fair elections – the most sacred right in our democracy and the very heart of our Constitution. We must continue to rebuff these threats to ensure that American democracy remains healthy and strong. My administration is pursuing an all-of-government effort to protect and expand the fundamental right to vote and make our democracy more equitable and accessible for all Americans," Biden said.

Last Thursday, Republicans in Texas passed election integrity legislation that Democrats in the state have called an effort to restrict voting rights. Republicans have said they try to ensure the integrity of the election system by limiting mail-in voting as well as early voting hours, banning drive-through voting and sending unsolicited absentee ballot applications and providing greater access to poll watchers.

Biden went on to officially proclaim September 17 as both Constitution Day and Citizenship Day, as well as September 17 through September 23 a Constitution Week, which he said celebrate the US Constitution and the rights of citizenship, including voting right.

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Pentagon Contract Seeks Alternate GPS Using Low Earth Orbit Satellites - Northrop Grumman

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - A US Defense Department research unit awarded a contract to develop an alternate global positioning system (GPS) using satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO) that would operate independent of the present GPS, Northrop Grumman said on Thursday.

"Northrop Grumman's software-defined Positioning, Navigation and Timing technology will offer military users an agile new signal from LEO that is not dependent on existing satellite navigation systems," the company's Vice President for Emerging Capabilities Nicholas Paraskevopoulos said in a press release.

Northrop Grumman's LEO positioning and navigation is designed to let military forces to operate in degraded environments that deny access to existing systems, the release added.

The "phase 2 development" contract valued at \$13.3 million was awarded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), according to the release.

DARPA is a Defense Department research unit with a history of developing futuristic technologies such as the present GPS system and the internet.

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Canada's Intelligence Gathering Capability Not Impacted By Absence From AUKUS - Trudeau

TORONTO, September 16 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Thursday said Canada's ability to gather intelligence will not be impaired by not being part of the new security partnership between the United States, United Kingdom and Australia (AUKUS).

On Wednesday evening, the leaders of the three nations declared the forming of the new AUKUS defense and security partnership to protect and defend their shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.

"No," Trudeau told reporters, when asked if Canada will lose defense intelligence by not being a part of the newly-minted defense pact.

Trudeau emphasized that Canada remains part of the so-called Five Eyes intelligence-sharing community with the the three countries and ll as New Zealand.

The Canadian leader said the pact is a "deal for nuclear submarines," which Canada is not in the market for "currently or anytime soon."

The first major initiative of the trilateral pact will be to deliver a nuclear-powered submarine fleet to Australia. However, the submarines will not be nuclear-armed, but conventionally armed and run by nuclear reactors.

Already there is speculation that the defense pact is aimed at curbing Beijing's growing influence around the world.

Earlier on Thursday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry expressed the view that AUKUS undermines regional peace, intensifies the arms race and harms the global non-proliferation effort.

The new alliance is rejecting claims that its purpose is to antagonize other countries.

"AUKUS is not intended to be adversarial towards any other power, it reflects the close relationship that we have with the United States and Australia, the shared values that we have, the level of trust between us," UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the country's parliament, commenting on Beijing's concerns.

Trudeau said Canada will continue to work with partners and allies on international challenges, including those posed by China.

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IMF Engagement With Afghanistan Suspended Until Clarity Reached on Government – Spokesman

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund's engagement with Afghanistan remains suspended due to the lack of clarity on international recognition of the government, but the organization stands ready to work to resolve the matter to stave off a looming humanitarian crisis, IMF spokesperson Gerry Rice said on Thursday.

"Our engagement with Afghanistan has been suspended until there is clarity within the international community on the recognition of the government," Rice said in a press briefing.

"The IMF program [on Afghanistan] there has been put on hold. The country cannot access the IMF resources."

The IMF, however, is deeply concerned over a looming economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, and the fund calls upon the international community to immediately focus on the matter, he added.

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World Bank to Stop Doing Business Report After Finding 'Data Irregularities' - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The World Bank Group said on Thursday that it will discontinue its Doing Business report after it discovered data irregularities in the 2018 and 2020 reports.

"After data irregularities on Doing Business 2018 and 2020 were reported internally in June 2020, World Bank management paused Doing Business. The next Doing Business report and initiated a series of reviews and audits of the report and its methodology," the World Bank Group said.

The internal reports also raised ethical concerns that were brought to the attention of the appropriate internal accountability mechanisms, including the conduct of current and former staff, the World Bank Group added.

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US, China Need to Maintain Communications on Climate, COVID-19, Terrorism - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - The United States and China need to maintain communications on a range of issues, including the coronavirus pandemic and terrorism, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"We must work together. We have to have a level of communication whether it is COVID, whether it is terrorism, whether it is climate, we still have to have some communication and dialogue with China on that," Pelosi said during a conversation at Cambridge Union Society. Pelosi said she views China's allegedly deteriorating human rights situation as a major obstacle to bilateral interaction and cooperation.

Pelosi also noted that she is the most unpopular person in China because she expressed her discontent about freedom of speech in the country and the situation in the South China Sea. Relations between the United States and China have entered a new round of deterioration on Wednesday following the announcement of a new security partnership including the United States, Great Britain and Australia with a focus on the Indo-Pacific region.

In response to this new initiative, the Chinese Embassy in Washington on Wednesday urged the countries to get rid of the Cold War mentality and refrain from creating alliances against others.

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US Retail Sales up in Aug, After July Slump, Recovering From COVID - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US retail sales, a bellwether of consumer sentiment, rose by 0.7% in August, after a 1.1% decline in July, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"Advance estimates of US retail and food services sales for August 2021, adjusted for seasonal variation and holiday and trading-day differences, but not for price changes, were \$618.7 billion, an increase of 0.7% from the previous month," a Commerce Department statement said.

Compared with a year ago, the growth in retail sales was 15.1%, reflecting continued recovery of the economy from the coronavirus pandemic.

The monthly growth in retail sales, meanwhile, was right on target with forecasts from economists polled by US media. This was despite a 3.6% drop in vehicle sales and a 3.1% slide in electronics and appliance receipts.

"This is an impressive report even with the negative revisions," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive, noting the growth in the furniture, food and beverage and online retail sectors that made up for the losses in auto and electronics sales. "For some perspective, retail sales are 15.1% higher than a year ago. That's well above the trend and the fear is that it (could) mean reverts. So far we're not seeing the evidence."

The US economy grew by an annualized rate of 6.5 percent in the second quarter of 2021, after a 3.5 percent contraction for all of 2020 due to shutdowns and other disruptions caused by COVID-19. The Federal Reserve envisions 6.5 percent growth for all of 2021, although some officials at the central bank have more ambitious expectations, forecasting growth of up to 7.0 percent.

The problem for the Fed though is inflation, as the Consumer Price Index, a key measure of inflation, expanded by 5.3% for the year to August, data showed.

The Fed's preferred gauge for inflation - the core Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, which excludes volatile food and energy prices - rose 3.6% in the year through July, its most since 1991. The PCE Index including energy and food rose 4.2% year-on-year.

The Fed's own target for inflation is 2% per annum.

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US Weekly Jobless at 332,000 in Continued Recovery From Pandemic - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 16 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose by 20,000 to reach 332,000 last week but remained below the key 400,000 level for a seventh week in a row amid continued recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the Labor Department said on Thursday.

"In the week ending September 11, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 332,000, an increase of 20,000 from the previous week's revised level," the department said in a news release. The last time jobless claims crossed the 400,000 level was at the end of July.

Economists polled by US media forecast 321,500 unemployment claims for the latest week on file, putting what the department's reported data slightly above target.

"The data was more or less in line with expectations," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on ForexLive.

Continuing claims for the week ended Sept. 4 — reported with a one-week lag — were at 2.67 million, versus 2.85 million for the week to Aug. 28. That brought the weekly unemployment rate down by 0.2% to 1.9%.

More than a year into the COVID-19 crisis, restoring job growth remains one of the main concerns of US policymakers.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. More than 7 million of those jobs have yet to return, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020. This year though, growth has been quite dynamic, with a 6.5 percent rebound for the second quarter, though that was still below the 8.5 percent expected by economists.

The Federal Reserve thinks growth will average at 6.5 percent for all of 2021. But Chairman Jerome Powell also says it may take a while for “full employment” — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.2 percent in August.